



## Contacting the Media

---

There are many ways to communicate with the media — phone calls, letters, media advisories, news releases and events. Some communication methods are more appropriate than others in a particular situation. Whether promoting a school event or trying to get a story to the public, you will have better success if you follow the suggestions provided in this tip sheet.

Keep in mind when you deal with reporters that reporting the news is a fast-paced, high-pressure job. Reporters want:

- ✓ *Facts:* Accurate information.
- ✓ *Quotes:* Short, colorful comments that they can attribute to a high-profile person in your organization.
- ✓ *Background:* Basic or historic information that will help the reporter understand the significance of a development.

Reporters also respond to the same basic courtesies as anyone else. When working with a reporter, be:

- ✓ *Responsive:* Return calls as soon as possible. Reporters have tight deadlines, and news dies if it is not reported quickly.
- ✓ *Honest:* Never lie. If you don't know an answer, say so and offer to find out. Be factual and refrain from expressing opinions.
- ✓ *Helpful:* Do a little research, suggest other credible sources on a story and let the reporter know you will help.
- ✓ *Realistic:* You cannot control the news. You can't determine whether a story runs, or its timing, placement, headline, content or tone.
- ✓ *Brief:* Because time pressures are very important, state the facts, answer questions in a straightforward way and don't run on with lengthy details.

### News Releases (Press Releases)

Although reporters and editors are reluctant to admit it, much of the news that is printed or broadcast originates with news releases. Your news release may be the only information a reporter may see on an issue.

A news release can serve several different functions:

- ✓ Publicize an issue or a story.
- ✓ Provide background information on a news event.
- ✓ Announce an upcoming activity.

---

## Contacting the Media

The well-prepared news release follows some well-defined guidelines:

- ✓ The headline should grab the reporter's attention.
- ✓ The lead paragraph should give the basic who, what, when and where of the story.
- ✓ The body of the release should be an inverted pyramid — with information appearing in the order of its importance. The inverted pyramid allows editors to shorten the story without omitting important information.
- ✓ Include one or two pertinent quotes for reporters to use in their stories.
- ✓ Try to keep the release under two double-spaced pages. Long releases may not be read.
- ✓ Check facts and spelling.
- ✓ Avoid jargon and technical terms. Provide explanations if you must use them.
- ✓ Don't use initials or abbreviations without identifying the meaning in the first reference.
- ✓ Write factually and objectively — avoid editorializing and using adjectives.

### Format

Type the release on one side of 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" X 11" plain white paper or your letterhead. Double-space and leave wide margins (for editor's notes).

- ✓ At the top of your release, provide:
  1. The local media name and address.
  2. The name and telephone numbers (home and office) of a contact person within your school/organization whom reporters can call for more information. Also state when this person can be reached.
  3. The date and time for the story's release ("For Release, 9 a.m., March 1, 2000" or "For Immediate Release").
  4. A short headline (hook) that describes the content at a glance.
- ✓ Begin the first paragraph with a dateline indicating where and when the story was released (for example, "Sacramento, March 1, 2000").
- ✓ When there is more than one page, type "—more—" at the bottom of each page (except the last page).
- ✓ Slug each additional page with a page number and identifying line ("Volunteer Awards, Page 2").
- ✓ End the release with the marks "###," "—30—" or "—END—".

---

## Contacting the Media

- ✓ An interesting photograph — an action shot or portrait of a person quotes — can enhance coverage.
  1. Use black-and-white glossies (at least 5" X 7") for newspapers and color slides for television.
  2. Include a cutline (a short, typed caption) with any photo. It should identify the main figures (left to right) and describe the activity.

### Pitch Letters

When a story is not hard, breaking news, reporters appreciate receiving a short letter, called a pitch letter, that briefly describes your story idea. A pitch letter:

- ✓ Concisely explains why the letter is being written.
- ✓ Summarizes the most important information on one paragraph before going into other details.
- ✓ Consists of no more than one page.
- ✓ Explains why the publication's or station's audience would be interested in the story.
- ✓ Includes a few interesting eyecatching details.
- ✓ Suggests possible approaches to the story.

Follow up with a phone call to the reporter about one week later to determine his or her interest in the story.

### Pitch Calls

Calling a reporter or news outlet to remind them of an event or announcement is an accepted practice — be prepared to present your information in a brief, logical, and easy-to-understand manner. Ask to speak to a reporter or assignment editor. Immediately give your name, organization, job title and reason for calling. Keep the call interesting while maintaining a professional tone. Convey enthusiasm for your story: If it does not sound important, the reporter isn't likely to think it is important.

### Keep It Brief

Remember that reporters usually are on tight deadlines and have little time to talk. Try to keep your pitch call brief and to the point. Remember your news hook and pitch the story (e.g., school reform, student success stories, school events). Don't become bogged down in details. There will be time for that later when the reporter actually arrives for an interview or a tour of your classroom or the student's work site.

Source: *Media Outreach: A Public Relations Guide to Working With Your Local Media*, School-to-Work Opportunities Office, Washington, D.C.